

Creation and Fall: A Theological Exposition of  
Genesis 1–3: Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 3

**Dietrich Bonhoeffer**

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With its initial volume appearing in 1995, Fortress Press embarked on a project that will cover the majority of two decades. *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works* (DBWE) is a massive effort to bring into English the complete corpus of the eminent German theologian. In this enterprise, new critical editions, edited by foremost Bonhoeffer scholars, are translated from the German editions of *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke* (DBW). Seven of the sixteen volumes (with an additional index) have been released to date. This year, volume 3, *Creation and Fall: A Theological Exposition of Genesis 1–3*, was also released in a new paperback edition.

*Creation and Fall*, the English edition of *Schöpfung und Fall*, holds an important place in Bonhoeffer's work for a number of reasons. As the first work of his most significant middle period, *Creation and Fall* comes immediately after the time when, according to the editors of the German edition, "Bonhoeffer must have experienced what he later referred to in the words: 'I came to the Bible for the first time.'" As such, *Creation and Fall* is the first in a line of works that moves Bonhoeffer from the more academic and abstract concerns that dominated his previous writings to more practical and concrete ethical considerations.

Originally a lecture course at the University of Berlin, *Creation and Fall* takes explicitly as its method "theological exposition," an approach that was not well received by Bonhoeffer's peers, due both to its Barthian overtones and to the incompatibility of such a method to the well-defined norms of academic theology. This choice of method corresponds with Bonhoeffer's increasing concern for the pastoral and ecclesial applicability of his academic work. Bonhoeffer's biographer and friend Eberhard Bethge writes, "Bonhoeffer had again fallen between two stools. The exegetes regarded the work as systematics, and the systematicians viewed it as exegesis. One group was indignant and the other took no notice."

Bethge refers to Bonhoeffer's earlier dissertation, *Sanctorum Communio: A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*, which was intended as a work to be "half historical and half systematic." Even in this earlier work, Bonhoeffer is not wholly unconcerned with specific ethical considerations. He writes, for example, "The Christian idea of equality does not allow for an egalitarianism but indeed only for the acknowledgment of the particular circumstances. And this is where Paul's patriarchalism, for example, finds its justification. This is the basic difference between the Christian and all socialist as well as idealist ideas of equality."

Nevertheless, *Creation and Fall* moves far beyond his earlier works by raising themes and issues that will recur throughout the rest of his work. In *Creation and Fall*, Bonhoeffer first begins constructing a framework to address the gap between contemporary theological doctrine and ethical practice. This concern is echoed in what Bonhoeffer later wrote in *Discipleship*, “It is becoming clearer every day that the most urgent problem besetting our Church is this: How can we live the Christian life in the modern world?”

Bonhoeffer’s initial attempt to answer this question is put forth in his doctrine of “orders of preservation,” which receives its first and most complete exposition in *Creation and Fall*. In the midst of a theological environment that variously rooted doctrine in fixed “orders of creation” or categorically denied the possibility of orders in God’s creation, Bonhoeffer attempts to find a mediating position between these two extremes. He does not reject all language of orders, as he writes, “That God creates by the word means that creation is God’s order or command, and that this command is free.” He does resist, however, the temptation to accept uncritically the orders that exist after the Fall as directly representative of the situation in the pristine primal state. The seriousness of the Fall prevents any reliable perception of the created orders, since “the whole created world is now covered in a veil; it is silent and lacking explanation, opaque and enigmatic.”

It is in part Bonhoeffer’s emphasis on the inability of fallen humans to know the created order that has led many scholars to see Bonhoeffer as largely in agreement with Barth on the issue of natural theology. This rejection of creation orders remains only part of Bonhoeffer’s position, however. After the Fall, God does not abandon his creation. Instead, “God’s look sees the world as good, as created—even where it is a fallen world. And because of God’s look, with which God embraces God’s work and does not let it go, we live.”

The means by which God upholds the world are his orders of preservation. Indeed, “God’s way of acting to preserve the world is to affirm the sinful world and to show it its limits by means of order.” These orders, however, must be distinguished from orders of creation. Bonhoeffer writes, “All orders of our fallen world are God’s orders of preservation that uphold and preserve us for Christ. They are not orders of creation but orders of preservation.” These preservation orders differ from the created order because “none of these orders, however, has in itself any eternal character, for all are there only to uphold or preserve life.” The emphasis on the world’s being preserved for Christ is extremely important to note here.

Such is the situation of humanity in the middle, between creation and consummation. This imagery of the “middle,” in which human knowledge has been split into the knowledge of good and evil, is a *leitmotif* of *Creation and Fall*. The obedient state in which humanity existed in the primal state has been divided, for “what in us breaks hopelessly asunder—the word of command and what takes place—is for God indissolubly one. With God the imperative is the indicative. The indicative does not result from the imperative; it is not the effect of the imperative. Instead it *is* the imperative.”

In this way, Bonhoeffer seeks to do justice to the radical and pervasive nature of the Fall while maintaining a measure of dependent and wholly contingent good in the world. He writes, “Yet just because it is *God’s* curse that oppresses it, the world is not wholly God-forsaken; instead it is a world that even under God’s curse is blessed and in its enmity, pain, and work is pacified, a world where *life is upheld and preserved*.” The orders of preservation represent Bonhoeffer’s attempt to outline the reality of human life in the middle and to provide a means by which to norm human activity.

These orders of preservation, which underscore the mix of good and evil in the world and find their end in Christ, find expression in Bonhoeffer’s later works. The good that remains in the world is ultimately derived from its relationship to Christ. In *Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer writes, “Only in so far as the Christian’s secular calling is exercised in the following of Jesus does it receive from the gospel new sanction and justification.”

In this way, the “secular calling” of the Christian is both given validation and relegated to secondary importance. The secular does not retain relevant goodness in itself apart from God, as might be construed from versions of the doctrine of creation orders. Instead, again from *Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer states, “Let the Christian remain in the world, not because of the good gifts of creation, nor because of his responsibility for the course of the world, but for the sake of the Body or the incarnate Christ and for the sake of the Church. Let him remain in the world to engage in frontal assault on it, and let him live the life of his secular calling in order to show himself a stranger in this world all the more.”

These positions later expressed by Bonhoeffer are related to his doctrine of the orders of preservation articulated in *Creation and Fall*. They become even more obvious in *Life Together*. Bonhoeffer reiterates his view from *Discipleship*: “Christians, too, belong not in the seclusion of a cloistered life but in the midst of enemies. There they find their mission, their work.” With respect to the Christian’s work, we must be sure to recognize the preserved ordering of the world. He writes, “We cannot simply take it for granted that our own work provides us with bread; rather this is God’s order of grace.”

The significance of *Creation and Fall* for fully understanding Bonhoeffer’s later works can hardly be overstated. His doctrine of preservation orders maintains lasting significance for Bonhoeffer’s theology, finding expression in a modified but clearly related form in his doctrine of the “mandates” found in his fragmentary *Ethics*. Bonhoeffer’s insights into the importance of the world and its relationship to the church remain fruitful and worthy of study. The prescience and depth of Bonhoeffer’s theology, of which *Creation and Fall* is a key component, allows us to echo Dorothee Soelle’s recognition of Bonhoeffer as “the one German theologian who will lead us into the third millennium.”

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